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New Political Parties and the Reconfiguration of Turkey's Political Landscape

Salim Çevik

The recent emergence of two splinter parties from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) points to a deepening crisis within the party and growing discontent toward party leader and president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Although the leaders of the two new parties, Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, are both former high-ranking AKP politicians, they differ significantly in their style of politics and ideological leanings. Babacan is trying to position himself at the center of Turkey's ideological spectrum and emphasize issues of good governance and the rule of law. Davutoğlu is aiming for the more conservative voters, focusing on the moral shortcomings of the current regime. Davutoğlu's strategy has better chances in the short term, whereas Babacan is poised for a long game. The importance of both parties relies on their potential to attract votes from the AKP base. In a country that is deeply divided into two almost equal-sized camps that support Erdoğan and oppose him, even a small fraction of votes shifting from the AKP to the opposition can be a game changer.

On March 11, former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan announced the formation of his long-awaited political party. Former President Abdullah Gül is known to be supportive of the party, even though he and his close associates did not have an official role in its formation. The party name, DEVA ("remedy"), is also the acronym for the Democracy and Progress Party. Earlier last December, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and later Prime Minister (PM) Ahmet Davutoğlu formed his own Future Party (GP). Both will compete for the electorate that has been disappointed by the AKP — a group that is slowly but steadily growing.

The launching of the new parties fell short of expectations in terms of raising the public's interest. Particularly DEVA attracted little attention on the day of its founding. This was mostly due to public fatigue, as its debut had been postponed several times last year. Once it was officially formed, the party could have generated interest, but the coronavirus epidemic began dominating the public debate and DEVA disappeared from the headlines. However, these parties still have more potential than other opposition parties to attract votes from the AKP base.

Currently, the political system is dominated by the ruling conservative-nationalist

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People's Alliance, comprised of the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the opposing Nation Alliance, composed of the secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the centrist-nationalist Good Party (IP). The Nation Alliance is supported by the Islamist Felicity Party (SP) and the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) on an ad hoc basis. What unites these parties is their opposition to Erdoğan and the presidential system. The divisions between the alliances had been so deep that swing votes moved within alliances and almost never between them.

There are two reasons why the old opposition parties cannot draw more support from the AKP. First, they do not appear to be capable managers. Second, the country is deeply divided over identity issues, most significantly between the secularists and the conservatives, and the Turkish nationalists and the Kurdish political movement. This polarization has enabled the AKP to consolidate its votes, despite the emerging problems of governance and economy. However, the new splinter parties now present an option for disillusioned AKP supporters. Such voters can oppose Erdoğan and defect from the AKP without leaving the conservative camp. Given that Erdoğan only reaches the required 50 percent vote threshold in the new system when in alliance with the MHP, such a defection could be detrimental to his rule. Sensing the gravity of the threat, Erdoğan is heavily attacking both parties.

Potential of the New Parties

In Turkish politics, splinter parties usually fail to attract significant numbers of voters. Several senior figures from across the political spectrum have formed new parties with much fanfare, but they have failed to attract voters. One exception, however, is the AKP, which was formed as a splinter party from the Milli Görüş tradition in 2001 and came to office within a year of its founding. Arguably, the circumstances for the AKP victory were quite exceptional and

hard to replicate. The AKP's success was the result of a series of economic and governance crises that discredited all the major political parties.

One reason both DEVA and the GP were recently formed is due to increased awareness that Turkey is currently going through a similar governance problem, with the potential to worsen. Amidst a deteriorating economic crisis, the Syria foreign policy disaster, the huge influx of refugees, and heightened social tensions, Erdoğan's approval rates are falling. Moreover, undecided voters now constitute one of the largest voting blocs. Disagreements of Babacan and Davutoğlu with Erdoğan go back years, and the current formation of the new parties is closely linked to this crisis. Thus, the fate of both parties will be determined more by the performance of Erdoğan than by their own actions.

Political Baggage of the Leaders

As senior members of past AKP governments, both leaders' records will have an impact on their future. Compared to Davutoğlu, Babacan has two considerable advantages. Davutoğlu was the mastermind of Turkey's increased involvement in the Middle East. Thus, he is largely associated with the ill-planned Syrian quagmire — 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey is a daily reminder of that failed policy. The issue is becoming a major source of public discontent, as shown in the AKP's electoral defeat in last year's municipal elections.

In contrast, Babacan is remembered as the steward of a successful economic program, a legacy that becomes ever more precious in the current economic crisis, which he argues is due to deviation from his policies. Among the array of opposition politicians, Babacan has the most credibility regarding governance issues.

Babacan's second advantage over Davutoğlu is his popularity among Kurdish voters. The AKP's slide into ethnic Turkish nationalism and the adaptation of a security-oriented paradigm toward the Kurdish

question started during Davutoğlu's term as PM. Davutoğlu is also associated with the cycle of violence and state repression in Kurdish cities that followed the AKP's electoral defeat on June 7, 2015. In contrast, Babacan was sidelined during that process and might therefore still appeal to Kurdish voters. In fact, discontented Kurdish voters of the AKP are expected to constitute the largest voting bloc and the backbone of DEVA during this phase.

Ideologue vs. Technocrat

Other factors distinguishing Babacan and Davutoğlu are their style of politics and their ideological leanings. Davutoğlu, a former academic, is more ideologically oriented than Babacan. In Davutoğlu's worldview, Islam and conservative values constitute the core values. In contrast, Babacan, though he personally follows a conservative lifestyle, has a less ideological approach to politics. He has a technocratic touch and emphasizes his expertise on economy management as being his greatest asset as a politician. Babacan tries to connect with voters by focusing on the rule of law, good governance, and bread and butter issues.

These different attitudes also shape their criticisms of the AKP. Whereas Babacan criticizes the authoritarian, conspiratorial, and anti-Western turn that the AKP has taken, Davutoğlu makes a moral critique and focuses on individual corruption and increased nepotism. In a direct extension, Davutoğlu's criticism of the AKP and Erdoğan is more personal. He openly criticizes Erdoğan and his immediate family, whereas Babacan shies away from such direct critiques, aiming to avoid the wrath of the government. Arguably, Davutoğlu's personal criticisms irritate Erdoğan and have prompt him to take punitive measures against Davutoğlu and his movement. The most striking example was the confiscation of the Foundation of Sciences and Arts and the Şehir University of Istanbul, lifetime achievement of Davutoğlu. These actions,

in turn, increase Davutoğlu's visibility and stature.

Babacan's emphasis on technocratic expertise is also visible on the list of the party's founders. There are several key bureaucrats, such as İbrahim Çanakçı, former Undersecretary of Treasury, and Birol Aydemir, former Head of the Turkish Statistical Institute. However, DEVA fell short of drawing political heavyweights. Even among former AKP dissidents, the party includes only a handful, and not the most important ones. Whereas Babacan aims to present himself as a team player, Davutoğlu's style of politics is at the other end of the spectrum. Throughout his term as the MFA and PM, Davutoğlu performed a one man show, as no one else was significantly visible. As a prominent academic with a clear-cut worldview, Davutoğlu is known to be an overconfident person who does not listen to advice or different viewpoints, as he rarely doubts his own wisdom. Throughout his tenure as the MFA, he worked with a smaller than usual team of advisors, often former students of his.

Given all these features, one can say that Davutoğlu's style of politics greatly resembles Erdoğan's. He is self-centered, plays on conservative values and identity-based issues, and his style is confrontational and at times polarizing. In contrast, Babacan presents himself as an antidote to Erdoğan and the confrontational style of politics that has become his trademark. Thus, Babacan can appeal to the segments of society that are wary of Erdoğan's fervent and polarizing politics. However, this also implies that Babacan would not have the rousing, electrifying effect on the masses that Erdoğan has — and to an extent Davutoğlu. With his non-confrontational style and his decision to avoid the cultural polarizations that dominate political life, Babacan will have difficulty mobilizing people. This is already evident, as Davutoğlu was able to form his party earlier and, so far, has managed to create an impression of a better organized and more energized movement.

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Impact of the Presidential System

If the ideological clarity of Davutoğlu has given him a head start compared to Babacan, the new presidential system strengthens the hand of Babacan. Its logic pushes political parties to form alliances. The more ideological outlook of Davutoğlu might create an impediment for the GP in forming alliances with the secular parties. In contrast, DEVA is more centrist, thus more prone to form alliances. Here, DEVA seems to have made a conscious decision to not limit its voter base to AKP voters. Although both parties – along with other opposition parties – are arguing for a return to the parliamentary system, they initially need to win in the presidential system. Defeating Erdoğan would require a combination of opposition votes and split votes that Babacan can take from the AKP. Thus, even though he does not rank among the most popular politicians in the country, in a two-person race with Erdoğan, Babacan's potential is higher than most opposition figures. Still, this requires that Ali Babacan – or the presidential candidate supported by DEVA – reach the second round. This would be impossible by solely relying on segments of the AKP base, and DEVA must also simultaneously appeal to the opposition bloc. Given that the CHP has a solid voter constituency of roughly 25 percent, DEVA either needs to attract voters from that base or manage to create an alliance or some sort of deal with the CHP. In either case, this demands ideological flexibility.

The party is clearly formed to meet that flexibility. Yet, it is walking a tightrope, as DEVA needs to find a balance that would make it attractive to both the AKP and the opposition bloc. This difficulty forces Babacan to focus on the economy and good governance and avoid divisive identity politics. He is presenting himself and his party as the new political center, and DEVA is aiming to be a catch-all party, integrating actors from different ideological leanings.

This was realized in the 1980s by the Motherland Party (ANAP) of Turgut Özal as well as in the 2000s by the AKP.

Conclusions and Challenges Ahead

Of the two challengers, Babacan has greater potential in the long run. Rather than directly confronting Erdoğan and trying to undermine him, Babacan will wait for Erdoğan to undermine and discredit himself leading up to the next presidential elections, scheduled for 2023. By avoiding confrontations and portraying himself as the political center, he aims to emerge as a consensus name in a post-Erdoğan Turkey. Moreover, the impact of the coronavirus crisis could mean that he may not need to wait too long, as the current crisis is pushing the already dire economy to its limits. Although Erdoğan seems to have received an initial boost of support following the outbreak of the disease, this is more of a global pattern and it is uncertain as to how long this will last.

If Babacan overcomes his short-term challenges in mobilizing people without resorting to cultural polarizations, he could be an important player in a post-Erdoğan Turkey. This is good news for Europe. Babacan's emphasis on teamwork and institutions will bring stability to the rollercoaster style in current Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, whereas Davutoğlu's foreign policy line would likely follow Erdoğan's anti-Western approach, a government that Babacan rules or has a significant role in will likely bring Turkey back to its more Western-oriented politics in the international arena, which would contribute to the restoration of the rule of law and human rights at home.

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